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SUBJECT: Pro-Lukashenko Communists Hijack Opposition Party

Ref: Minsk 737

Classified by DCM Constance A. Phlipot for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On July 15, the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) and the opposition Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) held rival conferences regarding the CPB-proposed merger of Belarus' two communist parties. According to CPB Central Committee Secretary Georgy Atamanov, CPB's efforts at merger were the results

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of widespread discontent among grassroots Belarusian communists with respect to BPC's anti-government platform and participation in the United Democratic Forces (UDF) opposition campaign last year. However, according to BPC Chairman Sergey Kalyakin, the merger represents a clear and creative effort by the regime to eliminate BPC as a viable opposition party. Both parties claim they are ready for the tentatively scheduled January 2007 municipal elections, and Kalyakin added that the opposition coalition is working together relatively well on this initiative. END SUMMARY.

Dueling Conventions

12. (C) On July 15, the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) held a conference reportedly with the participation of delegates from the opposition Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) to merge the two communist parties. Organizers of the merger conference claimed 231 delegates participated, including 74 from BPC, and issued a statement that described the merger as the "will of most Communists in the country." [Note: Media sources sometimes refer to the BPC the Party of Communists Belorusskaya, or PCB.]

13. (C) On July 15, the BPC held an extraordinary congress and adopted a resolution condemning the CPB merger conference as a "smokescreen" for the "stage-managed" creation of a new pro-government political party. The resolution denied the BPC had any connection with the CPB-initiated merger conference and declared the merger invalid on the grounds that only the BPC was competent on questions of party organization. Moreover, the resolution asserted that the merger violated Belarus' political parties law since neither the CPB nor the BPC had officially re-organized prior to the merger conference.

CPB Claims to Be True Communists, "Kalyakin Is Off the Reservation"

14. (C) On July 19, CPB Central Committee Secretary Georgy Atamanov

explained to Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff that under Kalyakin's leadership, the BPC had become an anti-government, anti-communist, and rightist party (as opposed to the CPB which Atamanov described as a genuine party of the left). Atamanov asserted that a split between Kalyakin and his BPC base became inevitable when Kalyakin joined the United Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition.

¶15. (C) According to Atamanov, the majority of BPC members were "true communists" and had become disillusioned with direction of their party. He attributed the participation and the support of 74 BPC members in the July 15 merger conference to this disillusionment. Atamanov repeatedly stressed that the merger was the consequence of the will of grassroots party members and not of the parties' leadership or the Belarusian government. He ridiculed any suggestion that the merger was an effort by the government to eliminate an opposition party or to create its own party. When asked, Atamanov expressed doubts that Kalyakin's party could last much longer but said there would be a place for Kalyakin in CPB, should Kalyakin accept CPB ideology.

Kalyakin: "The Regime Found a Creative Way to Get Rid of Me"

¶16. (C) On July 20, Pol/Econ Chief met with BPC Chairman Sergey Kalyakin who insisted that only five BPC members participated in the merger conference and had been expelled from the BPC. Moreover, he predicted that CPB would not be able to produce a single document that formally states BPC agrees to participate in the merger conference and concluded that there never was a legal merger of the two parties.

¶17. (C) Kalyakin asserted that the idea of the merger originated not from the CPB but the GOB's Presidential Administration (PA), specifically Deputy PA Head Anatoly Rubinov. According to Kalyakin's PA sources, Rubinov held a meeting with other senior GOB officials, including Minister of Justice Viktor Golovanov, shortly before the merger conference to seek the legal liquidation of the BPC and the political liquidation of Kalyakin himself. However, Kalyakin said his party has a membership of approximately 5,000 and would not likely lose the legal case. Note: according to Belarusian law, parties can be liquidated only through the Supreme Court or the party itself decides to disband. Thus, the Justice Ministry would have to prove to the Supreme Court that as a result of the alleged merger, the BPC has less than the 1000 members necessary to maintain its legal status.

Preparations for Local Elections

¶18. (C) Kalyakin noted the UDF is working together relatively well to prepare for the January 2007 local elections. He stated that the UDF together would try to field approximately 400 candidates in Minsk and the regional capital cities of the approximately 24,000 seats available. However, he predicted difficulties in recruiting activists to assume the personal risks associated with contesting elections that will surely be rigged.

¶19. (C) Atamanov did not know for how many seats his party would field candidates, but estimated that CPB would win 40 percent of the total number of available seats. Atamanov said that the local elections had contributed to the effort to merge the BPC and CPB since, according to Atamanov, BPC members in the regions outside Minsk heavily supported the CPB platform. He claimed that whereas Kalyakin would have few, if any, candidates in the regions beyond Minsk, CPB would field at least 220 candidates for local councils in the regions. Note: on July 19, the CPB formally requested the Justice Ministry to verify the exact numbers of BPC and CPB membership so that local BPC chapters could be re-registered under the new communist party.

Party Leaders' Thoughts on Role of Parties in Lukashenko's Belarus

¶10. (C) Pol/Econ Chief asked for Atamanov's thoughts about the low popularity of political parties in Belarus compared to that of other institutions of Belarusian society such as the presidency and the Orthodox Church. Atamanov characterized Lukashenko's government as strong and effective, stressing that "his government

works." By contrast, Atamanov said that political parties, including to some extent his own CPB, lack the people's trust because "they do not work." However, the CPB leader expressed confidence that as Belarus matures into a full democracy, "as in the case of the United States," political parties including the CPB will play a dominant role in Belarusian politics.

¶11. (C) Kalyakin expressed some concern about rumors that Lukashenko seeks to transform the Belarusian political system into a parliamentary system, install his son as head of the new parliament, and make the "expanded" pro-GOB CPB the "party of power" (reftel). Kalyakin noted that to realize this plan, the GOB would need to eliminate (at least legally) all genuine opposition parties, including BPC. However, Kalyakin stressed he does not know why the regime would choose such a complicated method of de-registering his party. He pointed out that the Ministry of Justice could have simply stripped away BPC's legal address and proceeded with immediate deregistration. Regardless, Kalyakin doubted Lukashenko is seriously thinking about his successor, unless the president is facing serious health problems. As far as Kalyakin is concerned, Lukashenko will tightly hold onto power as long as he is alive.

Comment

¶12. (C) Kalkayin's observation that Lukashenko could find easier ways to eliminate the BPC as a viable opposition party, such as merely de-registering the party, is probably correct. However, the merger tactic is much more subtle than the regime's recent imprisonment of former opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin and is thus less likely to draw fire from Western governments and human rights organizations. Moreover, we should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that Lukashenko seeks to hijack the BPC local chapters for GOB gain during the upcoming local elections and for the eventual creation of a seemingly legitimate avenue for his successor.

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